Chatsworth Train Wreck Impact on Fairbury

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Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. This railroad later changed its name to the TP&W Railroad. In the 1880s, the TP&W provided both freight and passenger service. To increase usage of its assets, the TP&W got the idea to offer pleasure excursion trips for passengers. In August of 1887, the railroad advertised a special excursion trip to Niagara Falls. This excursion train would pick up passengers along the TP&W route from Peoria to Indiana, then transport them on a sight-seeing trip to Niagara Falls.

The August 5, 1887, Fairbury Blade noted the special excursion train would leave Peoria at 7:15 PM. The train would pick up Fairbury passengers at 9:15 PM. The cost was $7.50 for the round-trip journey to Niagara Falls. This ticket cost would be equivalent to $212 in today's dollars. Berths in sleeping cars would be $5 for the round-trip. Seats in the "chair-cars" would be $2.50 for the round-trip. This same issue of the Blade noted that Fairbury had eight doctors, and a ninth doctor was going to move to Fairbury soon.

Today's passenger rail cars are constructed of steel and aluminum. Back in the 1880s, passenger cars were built primarily of wood. Passenger cars made from wood were much less expensive to produce than steel cars in that era. Train bridges were also constructed of wood instead of concrete and steel.

When the special Niagara Falls excursion train arrived in Fairbury at 7:15 PM on August 10, 1887, twenty-six passengers boarded the train. The bulk of the passengers on this train boarded in Peoria. The fact that most passengers were from the Peoria area was as expected since Peoria was the largest city along the TP&W train line. This excursion train utilized two locomotives for pulling the train.

The Niagara Falls bound train then proceeded east to Forrest, and then Chatsworth. The train left Chatsworth and started towards its next stop, Piper City. During the day, the TP&W crew had been working on the train tracks. This work included the burning of weeds. The work crew was instructed to make sure all fires were extinguished at the end of the day.

As this train approached a fourteen-foot long wood bridge east of Chatsworth, the fireman and the engineer of the first locomotive noticed flames on the track. Since there was not enough time to stop the train before the bridge, the fireman jumped from the engine. The engineer decided not to jump from the locomotive. The first locomotive actually made it over the burning bridge before it collapsed. The second locomotive and many subsequent wood passenger cars went off the track and down into the earth below the damaged bridge.

As each wooden passenger car went down into the ditch, it sheared the passenger area entirely off the passenger car in front of it. This phenomenon was called telescoping. There is a photograph showing five of these wooden passenger cars in a stack. Instead of a pile of five passenger cars being fifty feet tall, the stack is less than twenty feet tall. Most of the passengers in these telescoped cars were instantly killed.

Within a few hours, the call went to Fairbury for assistance. This call included the need for as many surgeons as possible. At 2:30 AM, three Fairbury physicians boarded a train heading east to Chatsworth. Also on board were a group of Fairbury citizens and a Blade reporter.

When the Fairbury contingent reached Chatsworth, they were shocked to learn that none of the twenty-three Fairbury citizens had been killed in the wreck. Fairbury doctors Barnes, Brewer, and Payson immediately started helping the only surgeon already attending to the injured. The rest of the Fairbury contingent went to the wreck site to help. Later, another group of Fairbury doctors traveled to Chatsworth to also help. They were doctors Lewis, Ostrander, Wilson, and Headley.

The Blade noted that a total of twenty-six people boarded the train at Fairbury. Twenty-three of these people were Fairbury citizens. None of these twenty-three Fairbury citizens were killed. Most of them suffered minor injuries.

Mr. Edwin F. Adams, of Blackstone, boarded the train at Fairbury. He was an old school friend of the local editor of the Blade. He was on his way to Watertown, N. Y. Mr. Adams wanted to see his father and mother, who had been visiting there for some time. Mr. Adams was killed in the train wreck.

Two men from Ottawa, named Vedder and Foley, boarded the train at Fairbury. They became separated in the wreck. Each telegraphed the friends of the other that he was killed. Imagine their feelings when a few hours after the wreck, they met.

The escape of seven Fairbury people, who were in the forward end of the second coach, was almost miraculous. That end of the coach went down into the ditch. The roof ended up being not more than three feet from the ground. Harry Cook quickly got out of his coach car. He luckily found an ax and chopped away the sash of a window and rescued five of the party. It was an hour and a half before he got Louis Werling and A. C. Bartlett out. Cook was the only man in the party who was able to work. The others were Charles Maunder, James Turner, and George Harris. Louis Zigler, in the same car, managed to get out and also rescued a lady. All of the above were bruised and cut on the feet and legs.

Mrs. F. M. Patton was in another coach and with great difficulty, escaped. She was considerably bruised but helped several ladies around her. All around the people mentioned above were dead bodies and people dying, and how everyone from Fairbury escaped alive is a mystery.

S. D. Murdock and wife, Mrs. Claudon, and Alta Virgin were in sleepers. The sleeper car that Murdock was in did not go down. This car was left standing right at the brink. The sleeper car the two latter were in was not among the ones wrecked.

An Illinois state agency, The Railroad and Warehouse Commission, issued its accident investigation report in December of 1887. They found the local section crew was not responsible for causing the bridge to burn. They concluded the most likely cause was embers or sparks from a freight train that passed over the tracks several hours earlier than the Niagara excursion train. Typical estimates for the train wreck are 625 total passengers, eighty-five killed, and 372 injured. It was one of the worst train wrecks of that era. The Chatsworth train wreck still ranks as the seventh worst in American railroad history in terms of fatalities. Fairbury was very fortunate that none of its twenty-three citizens were killed on that fatal Niagara Falls excursion trip.

Typical 1880s passenger car constructed of wood.